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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the results of an issue validation activity regarding the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas. Eight state directors of special education served on a communication panel to provide feedback on identified rural issues. They represented the states of Maryland, West Virginia, Texas, South Dakota, Maine, Utah, and New Mexico. The first section of this report characterizes rural America, with a discussion of definition, defining features, nature of the economy, employment and per capita income, and poverty. The next section identifies the population and characteristics of students with disabilities residing in rural areas. Section 3 describes the project's process in forming the questions and obtaining feedback on rural special education issues identified through a literature review. State directors agreed that the most prevalent issues for this population included the following: (1) recruitment and retention of personnel; (2) transportation; (3) language minority and limited English proficient students; (4) low incomes and poverty; (5) geographic isolation; (6) declining economies including high rates of unemployment; (7) financial burden of unfunded or underfunded state and federal mandates; (8) competing priorities; (9) poor fiscal management; and (10) parent involvement. Additional financial support was the most common recommendation of state directors. (Contains 28 references.) (DB)

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# Special Education in Rural Areas: Validation of Critical Issues By Selected State Directors of Special Education

By Joy Hicks

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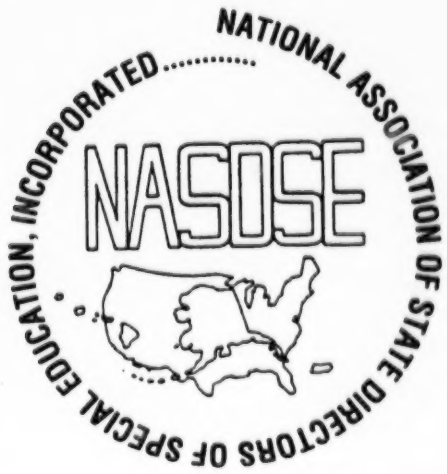


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## ABSTRACT

Project FORUM, a contract funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U. S. Department of Education and located at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) carries out a variety of activities that provide information needed for program improvement, and promote the utilization of research data and other information for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. The project also provides technical assistance and information on emerging issues, and convenes small work groups to gather expert input, obtain feedback, and develop conceptual frameworks related to critical topics in special education.

This report summarizes the results of an issue validation activity regarding the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas. The purpose of the activity was to obtain feedback from states on the validity and impact of ten critical issues which were identified from a recent survey of superintendents and business managers and a review of rural special education literature. Eight states participated as communication panel members whose response to a polling inquiry provided insight on the impact of the pre-selected issues on the provision of services to students with disabilities in their states.

# SPECIAL EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS: VALIDATION OF CRITICAL ISSUES BY SELECTED STATE DIRECTORS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

## Introduction

The implementation of The Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in rural areas poses a unique set of challenges to the community of citizens concerned with the education of students with disabilities. The Act entitles students with disabilities to a free, appropriate education, thus removing all barriers that previously excluded children with disabilities from our public schools. An important provision of IDEA is an individualized education program designed to meet the unique needs of the child and implemented in the least restrictive environment. In rural areas policy makers, administrators, educators, business partners and families are confronted with the dilemma of fulfilling this federal mandate for students with disabilities because of a number of powerful economic and social forces which occurred during much of the last decade.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Education provides assistance to states to assure the free appropriate education for all children with disabilities. As such, OSEP, with assistance from its funded projects, collects, synthesizes and analyzes information for program improvement. During the 1993-94 fiscal year, OSEP commissioned two related activities which were designed to examine key factors in meeting the needs of students with disabilities in rural areas.

Westat, Inc. was commissioned to prepare the report, *Serving Students with Disabilities In Rural Areas*[1]. The report offers a comprehensive review and discussion of the data and extant research on the topic. Project FORUM at NASDSE was subsequently commissioned to validate and expand, if appropriate, the key issues identified in the Westat report and throughout the literature that impact the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas. Eight states were chosen to participate in this communication network activity.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the results of the issue validation process. The paper is organized in five sections.

Section 1 - "Features of Rural America" provides readers with a brief summary of select features of rural America.

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[1] The Westat report, Serving Students with Disabilities in Rural Areas, is available from Westat, 1650 Research Blvd. Rockville MD 20850-3129.

Section 2 - "Educating Students with Disabilities in Rural Areas" profiles education in rural America and identifies the population and characteristics of students with disabilities residing in rural areas.

Section 3 - "Method of Inquiry" describes the process implemented by project FORUM in forming the questions and obtaining feedback on the issues identified in the Westat report and throughout the literature affecting the provision of services to students with disabilities in rural areas.

Section 4 - "Results of the Inquiry" summarizes the results of the inquiry

Section 5 - "Comments and Conclusions" provides a brief summary of the paper and concluding statements.

## Features of Rural America

Rural America is difficult to describe because communities vary in terms of geography, economic base, cultural characteristics and values (Clark and McDonnel, 1994). Presented below is a mini profile of rural America and its defining features. The picture of rural America is defined by the status of its economy, poverty, and employment situation.

### *Definition of Rural*

A singular and widely accepted definition of "rural" does not exists across state and federal statutes, regulations and surveys. The difference in the two most widely used federal terms (rural and nonmetropolitan) illustrates this point. The U.S. Census Bureau, in its decennial survey, defines a rural community as a place outside of an urbanized area in open country, or communities with less than 2,500 people, or where density is less than 1,000 residents per square mile. On the other hand, the Census Bureau, in their monthly household sample surveys, uses the terms "metropolitan" and "nonmetropolitan." "Nonmetropolitan" describes counties outside of large population areas of 50,000 or more (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992).

Writers often consider nonmetropolitan and rural areas as roughly equivalent but they are not synonymous since areas defined as rural may be found in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. This definitional dilemma is important because policies and funding eligibility of school districts are often linked to the rurality of an area.

Many schools that meet the definition of rural are located in counties defined as metropolitan. Rural schools in metropolitan counties account for 12 percent of metropolitan county schools and a quarter of all rural schools, and they enroll nearly two out of five rural students. Most rural schools and rural school districts are small with enrollments of less than 2,500. This reflects the low density of the populations they serve.

*Defining Features*

Irrespective of the specific term used to reference it, rural America is generally known by its low population density and the great distances separating communities from each other and from urban centers. Located outside of the boundaries of metropolitan or urban areas, rural areas are frequently scattered across non-urban states, prairies, mountainous regions, backwoods areas, low water regions, and in desert areas. Some rural communities are not so far away from each other but are isolated by roads and general terrain.

Rural communities may be points on a state map with no population or areas with populations up to 15,000. Such variation underscores the problem of generalizing to the rural community since this diversity exists not only across regions of the country but even within states (Clark and McDonnel, 1994).

*Nature of The Economy*

Contrary to popular perception, the economy of rural areas can no longer be equated with agriculture. Millions of rural farmers were displaced with the mechanization of farming. Farming now employs less than 1 in 10 rural workers. The largest rural industries are service producing. Rural industry such as retail and wholesale trade; hotel and tourists operations; and financial, health, and government services accounted for two thirds of rural jobs by the end of the last decade (Butler, 1991).

*Employment and Per Capita Income*

The rural-urban gap in per capita income has widened steadily for the last 15 years (Butler, 1991). McGrahan and Ghelfi (1991) reported that the rural employment situation is characterized by a mass of available jobs that require few skills and pay poorly. Companies with service and manufacturing jobs show a clear pattern of locating low-paying production operations in rural areas. Managerial and technical positions that pay better are more often found in cities. The 1991 unemployment rate in nonmetropolitan areas, adjusted to reflect those discouraged workers that had given up on finding work and stopped job hunting and those that could only find part time work, was 11.5 percent. The comparable metropolitan unemployment rate was 9.5 percent.

*Poverty*

On almost every measure, rural citizens are more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts. In 1986, one of every four children in rural America was living in poverty. A major reason for this poverty is the increase in the incidence of single parent families, headed primarily by women (Ohare, 1988). Historically, poverty rates in nonmetropolitan areas have exceeded those in urban areas. The rural rate increased during most of the last decade, from 13.5 percent in 1978 to 18.3 percent in 1985.

Rural poverty is most severe in the southern United States. Two thirds of the nation's rural Blacks and 95 percent of rural Black children, as well as most of the rural Hispanic population, are concentrated in rural areas where low income levels and poverty are prevelant, and low educational attainment is even more common among these groups (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1991). Further, rural residents, including children, living in poverty remain there for longer periods of time than their urban counterparts (O'Hare, 1988; Reid, 1990a; Sherman, 1992).

## Educating Students with Disabilities in Rural Areas

*Education in Rural America*

The reform movement presents unique opportunities for rural school districts and also poses many challenges. The structure and characteristics of many rural schools are conducive to school improvement. These positive factors include low student teacher ratios, individualized instruction and attention, cooperative learning opportunities, close relationships and ties to the community, and strong staff commitment (DeYoung, 1987, Stephens, 1988; Hobbs, 1990; McREL, 1990).

At the same time, the scarcity of human and fiscal resources has strained the capacities of many rural school districts (State Research Associates, 1988). The following commentary on education in rural America was summarized from a 1994 report, *The Condition of Education in Rural America*, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Research and Improvement, Programs for the Improvement of Practice.

Rural students are found in all parts of the country and in every state. The number and proportion of rural schools and rural school districts vary widely among the states and the different sections of the country. Rural residents contribute a greater percentage of their income for schooling; however, sparse settlement and isolation drive up the cost of providing all public services, including education.

Teachers and principals in rural schools are generally younger and less well educated, and receive lower wages and benefits than their nonrural counterparts. These factors contribute to the difficulty of recruiting and retaining school personnel in rural areas.

*Special Education in Rural America*

Rural schools are faced with unique challenges as they implement programs for students with disabilities (Passaro, Guskey and Zahn, 1994). According to data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) an estimated 21,701, or 27 percent, of all public schools are located in rural areas. These schools served, in that same year, an estimated 497,000 students in special education programs (NCES, 1993b).

A different estimate (475,510) of students with disabilities served by rural schools was obtained when WESTAT merged data from the 1990 Office for Civil Rights Elementary and Secondary School Survey with the Common Core of Data (CCD) Public School Universe File. The difference may be the result of the way in which rural is defined. This merged data file revealed similar distribution patterns of students across disability categories between rural and nonrural areas. For example, 243,291 (5.52%) students were classified as learning disabled in rural areas as compared to 1,724,647 (4.75%) in nonrural areas. The other disability categories ( mental retardation, hearing impairment, speech/language impairment, visual impairment, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, deaf-blindness and multiple impairments) are even more similar in their distribution patterns.

Typically, students with profound learning needs or low incidence disabilities in rural areas are served in more restrictive settings such as out-of-district residential placements, home bound instruction or one-on-one tutoring (Zeph, 1991). Also, children are often bused many miles to cluster or regional sights for specialized instruction in a segregated classroom.

A recent survey of superintendents and business managers of small rural districts (Freitas, 1992), and a review of rural education literature identified the following issues as major concerns in the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities.

- Recruitment and Retention of Personnel
- Transportation
- Language Minority and Limited English Proficient Students
- Low incomes and Poverty

- Geographic Isolation
- Declining Economies Including High Rates Of Unemployment
- Financial Burden of Unfunded or Underfunded Federal and State Mandates
- Competing Priorities (Education vs. Focus on Survival)
- Poor Fiscal Management
- Parent Involvement

## Method of Inquiry

Project FORUM was requested by the Office of Special Education Programs, US Department of Education to convene a communication panel to examine and validate the issues which may affect the capacity of states to provide appropriate programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas. Because of its location at the National Association of State Directors Of Special Education (NASDSE), Project FORUM is uniquely equipped to implement this task with its ongoing communication network which includes state directors of special education and contacts with other national, state and local organizations.

The Project FORUM team developed a framework for the task based on a careful review of the Westat document, a review of related literature, an interview with the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES), and discussions with the Executive Director of NASDSE. These initial steps resulted in the selection of the final list of ten issues for validation. Eight state directors of special education were selected to serve on a communication panel to provide feedback on the identified rural issues. States participating in the communication panel were Maryland, West Virginia, Texas, South Dakota, Maine, Utah, and New Mexico. Directors were chosen from among a group of states that serve large rural special education populations and/or who have strong interest in rural special education issues.

Telephone calls were made to each participant to discuss the task and the process for obtaining feedback. A one page rural special education polling panel inquiry was developed and mailed to the directors (Appendix A). The inquiry listed the issues identified above and asked each participant to respond to four questions. The results of the inquiry are reported in the next section of this paper.

## Results Of The Inquiry

All eight directors responded to the rural special education inquiry. The results of their collective responses to each question are summarized below.

**Question 1. Do you agree that these are the most prevalent/pressing issues in providing programs and services to students with disabilities living in rural areas?**

All eight (100%) directors agreed that the issues identified above are the most prevalent issues in providing programs and services to students with disabilities living in rural areas.

**Question 2. What would you add or delete from the list?**

Two of the eight states (Kansas, and Utah) did not expand or reduce the list of proposed issues. Maine and West Virginia deleted poor fiscal management from their list, while South Dakota deleted two issues: language minority and declining economies. Additions to the list from three states included:

- Lack of ability to compete in the job market (Texas)
- Limited opportunity for teachers to participate in staff development and lack of university training programs that prepare teachers for rural assignments (Maryland)
- Crime, violence and drug abuse; limited curricular offerings due to size of rural districts (New Mexico)

**Question 3. From the list as you revised it, what is the most critical issue facing your state?**

Five of the eight states (65.5%) cited the recruitment and retention of personnel as the most critical issue facing their state. The five states are South Dakota, New Mexico, Maine, Texas and Maryland.

South Dakota also listed the financial burden of unfunded or underfunded federal and state mandates as a critical issue in their state along with West Virginia. One state cited geographic isolation (Utah), and one identified declining economies as the most critical issue facing their state (Kansas).

New Mexico noted, "the issues are related...i.e., economic issues create problems in recruitment and retention, lack of job opportunities which limit training and transition options, and increased poverty levels which increase the chance of poor health care, especially prenatal care."

**Question 4. What one recommendation would you offer that would have the greatest impact on improving special education programs and services for students with disabilities in rural areas?**

Three states (Maryland, West Virginia, and Texas) recommend additional financial support/sufficient funding as the chief recommendation for improving services to students with disabilities in rural areas. Texas and Maryland suggest increased teacher salaries to serve as incentives to attract personnel to rural communities. An increase in the number of related service personnel graduating from institutions of higher education was recommended by New Mexico. West Virginia suggests additional funds to increase personnel responsible for implementing IEPs or a decrease in mandates for paperwork and documented procedures that reduce instructional time. Maryland proposes additional financial support to expand technology, equipment and materials for rural programs. Kansas also identified technology as the major recommendation for improving services in rural localities.

Utah's primary recommendation for program improvement is that attention be given to rural areas in the federal funding of proposals. South Dakota recommends an emphasis placed on service coordination across delivery systems and Maine perceives parent involvement as the one recommendation that would have the greatest impact on improving special education services for students with disabilities living in rural areas.

## Summary and Conclusions

The results of the validation process indicate that, for the most part, the respondents agreed on the major issues or concerns which impact the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas. There was less consensus on the "one" recommendation that would have the greatest impact on improving programs and services for students with disabilities in rural areas. Clearly, additional financial support for rural programs and personnel is the most common recommendation across respondents. Collectively, the suggestions from the eight participating state directors could comprise the major components of an action agenda for improving services to students with disabilities in rural areas.

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## APPENDIX A: RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION POLLING PANEL INQUIRY

## RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION POLLING PANEL INQUIRY

**Name:**

**State:**

**A 1990 survey of superintendents and business managers of small rural districts and a review of the literature identified the following issues as some of the major concerns in the provision of special education programs and services to students with disabilities.**

- RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF PERSONNEL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MEETING THE NEEDS OF LANGUAGE MINORITY AND LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENTS
- LOW INCOMES AND POVERTY
- GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION
- DECLINING ECONOMIES INCLUDING HIGH RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT
- FINANCIAL BURDEN OF UNFUNDED OR UNDERFUNDED FEDERAL AND STATE MANDATES
- COMPETING PRIORITIES (EDUCATION vs. FOCUS ON SURVIVAL)
- POOR FISCAL MANAGEMENT
- PARENT INVOLVEMENT

1. Do you agree that these are the most prevalent/pressing issues in providing programs and services to students with disabilities living in rural areas?

2. What would you add to or delete from the list?

3. From the list as you revised it, what is the most critical issue facing your state?

4. What one recommendation would you offer that would have the greatest impact on improving special education programs and services to students with disabilities in rural areas.

**Thanks again for your participation in this activity. Please fax your response to Joy Hicks at 703/519-3808.**